

Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Brent R. Hartley

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Thank you very much for the invitation today and the honor of delivering one of the last lectures of the UN Summer School program. Participants have tackled a series of incredibly challenging issues over the past few days, and I'm humbled by the opportunity to talk with you today about one of the most critical issues of our time – the urgent need to combat and adapt to climate change.

As I am sure many of you are, I am a nature lover and an environmentalist. I grew up hiking and skiing in the mountains of Oregon. And today, here in Slovenia, perhaps my favorite times are the weekends and holidays I spend hiking and skiing in the mountains of this magnificent country.

The issue of climate change started out in the United States as a conversation about pollution and ecology. But over the course of my 30 year career as a diplomat, I have seen a profound evolution in how we understand and discuss the issue.

Historically it has been an environmental issue, or maybe, for some, an economic challenge. But from my perspective as a diplomat, I would add that increasingly we understand how central climate issues are to global security.

Measured against the array of global threats we face today – terrorism, extremism, epidemics, poverty, nuclear proliferation – climate change belongs on that very same list. It is, indeed, one of the biggest threats facing our planet today.

As you probably know, this is not a universal belief back in my country. There are still some people who refuse to admit that climate change is real. But what we know is that the best scientists in the world have documented that climate change is happening. The science is indisputable. The fossil fuels we burn release carbon dioxide, which traps heat. And the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are now higher than they have been in 800,000 years.

As a result, the planet is getting warmer. Fourteen of the 15 hottest years on record have been in the past 15 years. Last year was the planet's warmest year ever recorded. The world's glaciers are melting, pouring new water into the oceans. Over the past century, the sea level rose by over 20 centimeters (about eight inches). This century it is projected to rise between 30 and 120 cm (from about one to four feet).

Around the world, climate change increases the risk of instability and conflict. Rising seas are already swallowing low-lying lands, forcing people from their homes. As President Obama pointed out during his recent visit to Alaska, this is not limited to island nations in the Pacific or Indian oceans, but also includes, among other places, villages in Alaska. More intense and

frequent droughts and storms will exacerbate shortages of water and food, increase competition for resources, and create the potential for mass migration.

New York Times columnist and globalization expert Thomas Friedman asserts that climate change is already having a profound impact on events in the Middle East, noting:

- A heat index reading of 163° Fahrenheit (over 70° Centigrade) in Bandar Mahshahr, Iran, this summer (a combination of heat – 115° F / 48° C – and humidity – 90%;
- Demonstrations in Baghdad over lack of power for air conditioning, an issue that eclipsed the ISIL threat;
- More deaths in Pakistan this year due to a heat wave than to terrorism;
- Syria's revolution being fueled in part by a four-year drought that drove farmers to the cities in the absence of government assistance.

President Obama has made the point repeatedly that the challenge of climate change is universal. It affects every country on the planet. No nation is immune. And so we need to act -- and we need to act now.

Over the course of my career I've seen varying approaches in Washington on climate change. Never before have I seen the level of urgency or leadership on this issue that we have today. President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have made confronting climate change a key pillar of U.S. global diplomatic efforts.

Preparing for the impacts of climate change is incredibly important. But it will not be enough. We must also prevent the worst effects of climate change from occurring. And the only way to do that is to slow down the warming of the planet. Some warming is now inevitable.

The science tells us that we still have time to prevent the worst impacts of climate change, but that window is closing quickly.

In December, the world will come together at the UN Climate Conference in Paris, and we will see whether or not we can muster the collective political will to reach an ambitious, comprehensive agreement. The world has to start finally reducing its carbon emissions. And that's why President Obama has committed the United States to leading the world on this challenge.

Over the past six years, the U.S. has done more than ever before to reduce harmful emissions, including by:

- making unprecedented investments to cut energy waste in our homes and buildings,
- increasing standards to double the fuel efficiency of our vehicles,
- developing and using more clean energy than ever before – increasing at least ten-fold our generation of solar power, and tripling our wind power generation.

It's all helped the U.S. reduce our carbon emissions more than any other advanced nation. And today, we can be proud that our carbon pollution is near its lowest levels in almost two decades. But we've got to do more.

This year, President Obama committed to doubling the pace at which we cut carbon pollution in the U.S. and announced the goal of reducing emissions by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels, and to accomplish that by year 2025. That would also enable us to cut our emissions by 83 percent by 2050, which is what scientists say we need to do in order to prevent warming from exceeding the threshold level of 2 degrees centigrade. We are committed to this path in the U.S.

But just as importantly, we have to achieve a strong global agreement this year to start reducing total global emissions – every nation must do its part. No single country can solve this problem alone.

Secretary Kerry says it this way: Even if every single American biked to work or carpooled to school, or used only solar panels to power their homes; even if every American each planted a dozen trees; even if we somehow eliminated all of our domestic greenhouse gas emissions – that still would not be enough to offset the carbon pollution coming from the rest of the world.

The same would be true if China went to zero emissions today but others continued with business as usual. It's not enough for one country or even a few countries to reduce emissions if their neighbors are unwilling to do their share. So when we say we need a global solution, we mean it. Anything less simply won't work.

Industrialized countries obviously play a major role. We benefitted by developing and growing, through our industrialization, but we also created the basis for this problem. Even if all the industrial countries stopped today, it doesn't solve the problem. And it certainly is a signal that other countries should not repeat the mistakes of the past. We have to remember that, today, about 60% of global emissions come from developing nations. So it is imperative that developing nations be part of the solution.

There has been some encouraging progress over the past year. In particular, the United States and China, the world's two largest emitters of carbon pollution, in November 2014 announced their agreement to ambitious, respective climate pledges and committed to work together with other countries to achieve a global climate agreement in Paris, and we agreed to a long-term transition to low-carbon economies. This included a commitment by China to begin reducing carbon emissions by 2030 and to set a target of 20% of clean energy in its energy mix by 2030.

Around the same time, the EU also announced its target as well, which means we now have strong commitments from the three largest emitters in the world. Now we need more nations to follow suit and announce ambitious mitigation targets as well.

We know that even the strong agreement we're trying to reach in Paris will not completely eliminate the threat. But it is an absolutely vital step, and if our vision of an ambitious agreement is achieved, it would demonstrate that countries across the globe now recognize the problem and the need for each and every one of us to contribute to a solution.

Secretary Kerry has been very blunt about this. If we fail, he has said, future generations will not and should not forgive those who ignore this moment, no matter their reasoning. If we do not succeed, future generations will judge our efforts today not just as a policy failure but as a collective moral failure of historic consequence. And they will want to know how world leaders could possibly have been so blind or so ignorant or so ideological or so dysfunctional and, frankly, so stubborn that we failed to act on knowledge that was confirmed by so many scientists, in so many studies, over such a long period of time.

We know what we have to do. We have to find a way to summon the resolve that we need to tackle this shared threat. We can reach a good, forward-leaning agreement in Paris. We can carve out a path forward. We can secure our future and our earth, but we must all do it together.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the UN Summer School. I would like to hear from you about your views and concerns, and would be pleased to take any questions.